COMMON AGENCY

A Manual for Civic Power

"The powers not delegated are reserved to the people."

-Tenth Amendment, U.S. Constitution

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Published January 10th, 2026
250 Years After Common Sense

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ON COMMON GROUND

A Constitutional Bridge from Individual Rights to Collective Power

Your constitutional rights aren't just personal protections—they're **distributed authority**. When the framers wrote "reserved to the people," they didn't mean stored away somewhere safe. They meant actively held by citizens like you, ready to be exercised.

Every right functions best when your neighbors can exercise theirs too. Speech gains power when many speak. Assembly acquires meaning when people truly gather. Petition works when backed by collective concern. Due process requires everyone's rights being respected.

The Scaling Principle

Constitutional participation works at three levels:

- **Individual:** register, vote, attend meetings, request records, contact representatives. *Impact: civic literacy, personal agency.*
- **Collective:** coordinate with neighbors, organize group attendance, build coalitions. *Impact: community influence, local policy change.*
- **Network:** connect local efforts regionally; coordinate campaigns; build electoral power. *Impact: structural change.*

The choice isn't individual vs. collective action—it's between isolation and coordination. The Constitution protects both. Your community needs both.

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COMMON AGENCY: THE FOUNDATION

The Seven Principles

- **Agency is yours.** Not a gift from government. A capacity you retain until you surrender it. Don't.
- **The default is freedom.** You don't need permission to act—only the absence of a specific prohibition. Follow time, place, and manner rules for public spaces.
- **Rights are tools.** Not museum pieces. Instruments to be wielded. Use them.
- **Engagement has tiers.** You don't have to do everything. Move up one level from where you stand.
- **Agency evolves.** New terrain requires new maps: data, identity, digital life.
- **Agency can be captured.** Wealth learns to hijack mechanisms. Reclamation is the work of this generation.
- **Accountability flows upward.** A system that only punishes down is not justice.

The Creed

> *The powers not delegated remain with me. Agency is not granted—it is reserved. The default is freedom. My rights are tools, not relics. I do not need to do everything; I need only move up one level from where I stand. I will document what I witness. I will show up where decisions are made. When agency is captured, I will work to reclaim it. When accountability fails to flow upward, I will demand it. The experiment continues—because I do. Absence is abdication. I choose presence.*

Quickstart — Choose Your Track

10-Minute Track

- Verify your voter registration.
- Save the STAY ARMED cheat sheet to your phone.
- Find your next city, county, or school board meeting.

60-Minute Track

- Complete the 10-minute track.
- Read Parts I–III (foundations and protections).
- Identify your representatives at every level and add them to your contacts.
- Sign up for one public meeting alert or agenda email.
- File one public records request (start simple).

The Agency Loop (Practice Weekly)

- **Observe** — What is happening?

- **Document** — What's the evidence? Save it.
- **Speak** — Where is the microphone? Use it.
- **Escalate** — Who has formal authority? Contact them.
- **Repeat** — Weekly, not once.

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USING THIS MANUAL

What This Is / What This Is Not

This IS:

- A nonpartisan civic manual based on existing law
- A set of mechanisms available to any resident
- An invitation to exercise what was reserved to you
- **This manual promotes only lawful, nonviolent civic action**

This is NOT:

- Legal advice
- A call to violence
- Affiliated with parties, campaigns, or PACs
- A substitute for professional counsel

Y/OUR (Pronounced "your")

Throughout, Y/OUR means yours individually and ours collectively. Individual action multiplies when coordinated. Collective action protects individual rights.

Legal • Safe • Smart

Legal: Allowed by law. **Safe:** Risk-aware for you and others. **Smart:** Strategically effective. Choose actions that meet all three where possible.

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YOU ALREADY HAVE IT

What You Can Do Without Asking Permission

- Vote in every election (federal, state, local, primary, special).
- Speak on matters of public concern, including criticism of government.
- Assemble peacefully with others in public spaces.
- Petition government for redress of grievances.
- Record police and public officials performing public duties (keep safe distance; don't interfere) **[Check Local: audio consent, courthouse/security rules]**.
- Attend public meetings; speak during public comment.
- Request public records from any government agency.
- Run for office at many levels; serve on boards and commissions.
- Serve on a jury; judge facts and apply the law as instructed.
- Sue in small claims court without a lawyer.
- Organize a union with coworkers (NLRA protections apply) **[Check Local: public sector/role exceptions]**.
- Recall elected officials where allowed by state law.
- Remain silent when questioned by authorities; request a lawyer.

Tiers of Engagement (Move Up One Level)

- **Tier 1 — Informed:** Know who represents you; track agendas; know what's on the ballot. (~30 min/mo)
- **Tier 2 — Present:** Attend one public meeting; your presence changes the room. (2–4 hrs/mo)
- **Tier 3 — Vocal:** Speak during public comment; submit written remarks. (4–8 hrs/mo)
- **Tier 4 — Witnessing:** Document meetings, file records requests, court-watch. (8–15 hrs/mo)
- **Tier 5 — Organizing:** Coordinate testimony, build coalitions, train others. (15–30 hrs/mo)
- **Tier 6 — Running:** Serve on boards; run for office; become a decision-maker. (varies)

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WHAT'S ACTUALLY PROTECTED

Core Protections (Plain Language)

First Amendment: speech, assembly, petition, press, and (in many circuits) the right to record officials performing public duties.

Fourth Amendment: protection against unreasonable searches and seizures; warrants require probable cause and specificity; phones generally require warrants to search (exceptions can apply: border, supervision status, exigency, consent).

Fifth Amendment: right to remain silent; right against self-incrimination; due process.

Invoking Your Rights (Exact Words Help)

- "Am I free to go?" If yes, leave calmly.
- "I am invoking my right to remain silent. I want a lawyer." Then remain silent.
- "I do not consent to searches."

Tools of Agency (Use Them)

- **Jury Service:** Jurors decide the facts and apply the law as instructed by the court. An acquittal is final and cannot be overturned. Follow court instructions during selection and deliberation.
- **Small Claims Court:** Sue without a lawyer. Filing fees are modest. Hold wrongdoers accountable.
- **Unionize:** NLRA protects organizing; document retaliation and file appropriately.
- **Recall:** In many states you can remove officials mid-term via signatures and a special election.
- **Self-Defense:** Laws vary widely. This manual does not advise on use of force. Learn your state's rules before acting.

Scripts for Civic Moments

At a public meeting: "My name is [NAME], a resident of [AREA]. I'm here to speak about [TOPIC]. I ask that you [SPECIFIC ACTION]. Thank you."

When recording officials: "I'm recording in a public space. This is protected First Amendment activity. I'm not interfering with your duties."

With law enforcement: Use the exact invocations above; be polite and brief; stop talking after invocation.

Myth / Truth (Read Closely)

- **Myth:** "You can't record here." **Truth:** In public spaces and from public vantage points, you generally can—so long as you don't interfere. [Check Local]
- **Myth:** "Only experts can speak at meetings." **Truth:** Public comment is for the public. Prepare, be concise, show up.
- **Myth:** "If I don't know every rule, I should stay quiet." **Truth:** The default is freedom. Start small, move one tier up.

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THE STRUCTURE UNDERNEATH

Local: City councils, school boards, counties—most decisions affecting daily life happen here. Few members, high leverage.

State: Elections, criminal law, education policy, licensing. Many don't know their state rep—fix that.

Federal: Congress makes laws; agencies implement; courts interpret. Staff tally constituent contact—use that.

Why 2026 Matters

All 435 House seats, 33–34 Senate seats, 36 governorships, 82 of 99 state legislative chambers, and thousands of local offices are on ballots. This configuration determines district maps, state policy, and the math for constitutional reform. **Participation changes structure.**

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF CHOICE

Why Two Parties Dominate (The Design Problem)

Winner-take-all elections tend to collapse to two parties (Duverger's Law). Add ballot access rules, debate control, closed primaries, gerrymandering, and campaign finance—and choices are constrained before you vote.

Existing Tools to Broaden Choice

- **Ranked Choice Voting:** Vote sincerely; if your first choice loses, your vote transfers. Used in Maine, Alaska, NYC.
- **Approval Voting:** Vote for all acceptable candidates. Used in Fargo, St. Louis.
- **Open / Top-4 Primaries:** All voters participate; finalists advance regardless of party.
- **Fusion Voting:** Multiple parties nominate the same candidate; voters signal values without "spoiling."
- **Proportional Representation:** Multi-member districts produce seats in proportion to votes (requires larger reform).
- **Ballot Initiatives:** In many states, citizens can place reforms on the ballot directly.

Local Reform Playbook

- Map your state: initiative power, charter authority, current primary system.
- Find allies: FairVote, RepresentUs, League of Women Voters, local reform orgs.
- Pick targets: city council or school board reforms are often feasible first wins.
- Educate: simple explainers; emphasize benefits for all voters.

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EQUAL JUSTICE (THE ACCOUNTABILITY GAP)

A system that enforces downward but not upward isn't justice—it's control. The law's credibility depends on equal application.

Two Patterns (Name Them)

- **Downward enforcement:** civil asset forfeiture; cash bail; harsh sentences for minor offenses.
- **Upward non-enforcement:** patterns where powerful actors avoid prosecution (e.g., deferred prosecution for corporate crime; fines treated as cost of business).

Two Responses (Choose One)

- **Cynicism:** "Participation is pointless." This is surrender.
- **Agency:** "Because the system fails to self-correct, external pressure is necessary." Use the mechanisms; build new ones where needed.

Demanding Accountability Upward

- Elect prosecutors who pursue powerful defendants; track records, not rhetoric.
- Fund investigative journalism and protect whistleblowers.
- Use transparency mechanisms: FOIA, sunshine laws, open courts.
- Advocate for resources: IRS, SEC, EPA enforcement budgets matter.

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WORKING TOGETHER

A Companion for Collective Action

Why Together

Individual agency is essential and insufficient. Recording alone is brave. Recording with five neighbors is strategic. Recording as an organization is power.

The First Meeting Framework

- **Opening (5m):** Name the shared problem.
- **Stories (20m):** Each person's stakes.
- **Power analysis (15m):** Who decides? When and where?
- **Action (15m):** One concrete step in two weeks; assign names and dates.
- **Next (5m):** Schedule; who else to invite.

STAY ARMED (with Lawful Tools) — A Civic Defense Cheat Sheet

- **S — SPEAK:** At meetings, in comments, to representatives. Enter the record.
- **T — TRAIN:** Share what you learn; multiply agency.
- **A — ATTEND:** Meetings, hearings, trials. Presence changes rooms.
- **Y — YOU:** Are the agency. Don't wait for permission.
- **A — ASSEMBLE:** Coordinate with neighbors; protection scales.
- **R — RECORD:** Officials on duty; back up immediately.
- **M — MOVE:** Up one tier; consistency beats bursts.
- **E — ESCALATE:** When channels fail; complaints, media, coalitions.
- **D — DOCUMENT:** Receipts are protection; patterns are evidence.

Nonviolent, lawful actions only.

Emergency Scripts (Memorize These)

With law enforcement: "Am I free to go?" • "I am invoking my right to remain silent. I want a lawyer." • "I do not consent to searches."

When witnessing: "I'm documenting for community safety. Multiple people are recording. This is being saved."

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INFORMATION HYGIENE & ACCESSIBILITY

Information Hygiene (Work Clean)

- Verify before you amplify. Never act on a viral headline alone.
- Screenshot important posts with timestamps, usernames, and URLs.
- Assume coordinated amplification exists; look for identical phrasing across accounts.
- Keep a calm archive: cloud folder for video, docs, and notes.

Accessibility (Make It Usable)

- Black-and-white printable; large-print version; screen-reader friendly.
- Translations and audio encouraged. This is a commons—fork responsibly.

"Check Local" Badges

Laws vary by state and city. Where you see **[Check Local]**, verify your jurisdiction's specifics before acting.

Feedback & Versioning

This is a living document. Send corrections and local updates. Version stamp: **v1.6 (January 10, 2026)**.

Safety Reminder (Not Legal Advice)

This manual is educational, not legal counsel. Laws change. Verify locally. When in doubt, pause. When in danger, prioritize safety. **No change is worth personal harm.**

THE EXPERIMENT CONTINUES

Two hundred fifty years ago, a pamphlet argued that ordinary people could govern themselves. It didn't create the sentiment—it gave it structure and voice.

The mechanisms of self-governance exist. They can be captured—and reclaimed. They can be ignored—and exercised.

Y/OUR responsibility—yours individually, ours collectively—is to exercise what was reserved to us. Not to ask permission. **To act.**

The powers not delegated remain with you.

Exercise them.